

## Intersections

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### From the Editor

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For all that the Lutheran tradition in higher education may mean theologically, and how it has expressed itself historically, it comes to life and has its meaning on the campuses in how we give expression to it in our own lives and the ways we lead them and share them.

The planning committee which serves this project is now engaged in plans for the third conference, which will also be supported by the Lilly Endowment out of funds still available for the 1996 grant. We are also contemplating the direction for future issues of *Intersections*. We are considering putting in place a vehicle to provide opportunities for scholars on our campuses and elsewhere to engage in writing and sharing on this topic. In all of this your thoughts are always welcome. Your evaluations of the two conferences continues to help shape future events.

The Vocation of a Lutheran College project really lives, however, through the continuing and broadening dialogue taking place on your campuses. We are excited by the proposals we received from you about these activities. We are anxious to stay in touch with how they proceed. Thanks to all of you for your interest and your commitment to exploring the tradition in which we live and serve.

James M. Unglaube  
Director, Colleges and Universities  
ELCA Division for Higher Education and Schools  
January, 1997

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### From the Editor

#### An Invitation

Those of you who read the first issue of *INTERSECTIONS* and have this one in hand probably recognize a pattern. Both of these first two issues have much the same format: 1) a lead essay previously delivered at a Vocation of Lutheran College Conference and 2) several responses. The question therefore naturally arises, will all issues of *INTERSECTIONS* look like this? The answer is no, definitely not.

While we plan to devote one issue each year specifically to continuing the dialogue initiated at these conferences, we also intend another issue which is more open-ended, open-textured, and shaped by the kinds of essays, reviews, poems and/or other artwork you, our readers, send us. We'd be particularly interested in getting letters about things we've already published, things that may have inspired, puzzled or upset you. The idea is to engender engaged discussion. We hope, in fact, to receive so much good stuff from you to necessitate publishing more than twice a year. We aren't presently set up to do that, but it would be a nice problem to have.

Thus far a trickle of interesting manuscripts have begun to come in. We are in process of planning an exciting summer issue which will be sent out to your campuses first thing in September. So please write us and share your good work with us and thereby with your fellow faculty / administrators at the other ELCA colleges and universities.

#### Turning Toward Learning

Every semester I have a class of about 30 seniors read some selections from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. What they read includes the following sentences: "Learning and study [*theoria*] seem to be the only activities which are loved primarily for their own sake. For while we derive an advantage from practical pursuits beyond the action itself, from study we derive nothing beyond the activity of learning." These sentences never fail to draw a response, usually a disbelieving hoot of laughter. But frequently a student will say, "Not only is study useful for other ends, but that's the only reason that it's pursued at all. No one would study just for the sake of learning. It's not like it's pleasurable or something. If I didn't think the diploma would get me a job, I wouldn't be studying at all." At this point we usually have an interesting discussion about how an otherwise intelligent Hellene like Aristotle could have gotten this so wrong.

I am not the only person who has noticed that many students are not well disposed toward learning for its own sake. Many faculty colleagues (at my own and other institutions) testify to an array of facts: a) Students rarely pursue a reference or a suggestion to read something in addition to what is assigned. b) Even assigned material may be skipped if "it won't be on the test." c) Faculty are, consequently, spending more and more time "policing assignments." I, for example, find it necessary to have my students turn in daily reading reports on assigned reading. Failing to require this I find only about 1/5 of my students will read the assignments in a timely manner. d) Faculty who require substantial amounts of work from students (even in traditionally high-pressure majors like pre-med) are frequently blamed, negatively evaluated, and even verbally assaulted for expecting the quantity and quality of work they do. e) There is an alarming increase in cheating, plagiarism and academic dishonesty across the country. Frequently students respond to the "inconvenience" of being caught and punished by saying: "After all, I just wanted the grade, not to really learn that stuff."

Faculty gatherings over lunch or coffee often turn toward complaining about the lack of learning motivation in students. The problem is, of course, that our complaining about it does nothing toward addressing the problem. So my focal question is: "What can a college/university do to help turn students in a positive way toward learning?" I will not claim that it's a problem that can be "solved" or eradicated because the sources of it lie so deep in our culture. By the time students arrive in college the attitude may already be quite firmly set. But the question is: "What can we do to *help* turn students toward learning?"

Neil Postman, in his recent book, *The End of Education*, argues that this alienation toward learning takes place as commonly as it does because

young people across our country lack a set of narratives within which the efforts of learning make sense. Postman writes, "Without a narrative, life has no meaning. Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention. This is what my book is about." There are publicly espoused narratives that make sense of getting a diploma: "getting a good job," i.e., one that will support a high-consumption lifestyle, and there are narratives within which educational reform may make sense: "Keeping the US competitive in world markets." But, he notes, there are few, if any, narratives that connect the effort and discipline required for learning to a larger story or sense of purpose that students relate to.

Postman goes on to argue for organizing education around five "mega-narratives" that he thinks would make sense to college-age learners and inspire the effort required for learning.

Spaceship Earth - How can we learn to live sustainably and well in a world with finite resources?

The Fallen Angel - The investigation and acceptance of our history as an error prone species combined with a serious effort to learn from our own mistakes.

The American Experiment - The serious re-posing of Lincoln's question, whether a government of the people, by the people and for the people can long endure.

Word Weavers/World Makers - Learning how the creation of a language also constructs a world.

The Appreciation of Diversity - Learning to appreciate racial, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and learning to savor the richness of a pluralistic culture.

The discussion of any one of these could, I am sure, occasion lively debate among any faculty group. But I list them here not to discuss each so much as to appropriate Postman's general idea. I believe that there is merit in Postman's suggestion that many students today lack narratives in terms of which learning makes sense and has meaning. Postman suggests that those of us who teach in institutions embedded in a religious context do not have this problem. He suggests that education in a religious context automatically solves this problem since it naturally provides religious mega-narratives that motivate and inspire learning. I only wish this were so, but I think Postman here has overstated the case.

Each of the 28 ELCA colleges and universities has a mission statement. A quick reading of our college catalogues reveals, however, that they are, for the most part, general, vague, and innocuous. They are frequently statements designed to imply little and offend no one. But even in cases where the mission statements are fairly well-focussed and memorable one comes away from the reading of the catalogue with the feeling that there is little, if any, implicit connectedness between mission statement and academic program. So, the question is, how can we expect students to be inspired to learn by our mega-narratives when the faculty, administrators and trustees of our institutions are so little inspired by them?

Even in cases where there may be a close match between mission narratives and program we may fall short of Postman's ideal if we fail to make the connection explicit to each generation of faculty we hire and each generation of students we admit. How clear are we about the narratives that shape what we do and why we do it? Do we simply suppose that because people have read the catalogue that this connection is clear and obvious? Do we assume that the same statements that may have inspired learning and teaching at our institutions in the past continue to do so today? Do any students and faculty come to our institution because of its informing mega-narrative? Like all good philosophers, I have more questions here than I have answers. But sometimes questions can be informing and provocative too.

I want to pose a challenge to all of us who work at education within the Lutheran tradition. The first part of the challenge is to identify some of the mega-narratives which may be of particular salience to Lutheran Christians. Here are some that occur to me: a) An exploration of the meaning of **stewardship**, particularly the stewardship of creation. b) An exploration of **the freedom of the Christian** and its implications for learning. c) The implications of **sacrament**; that the transcendent is present in, with and under the concrete and ordinary. d) An exploration of **vocation** as it applies to career, our responsibility in and to our society, and to the vocation of being a student as well. I am willing to bet you can think of others at least as interesting.

While I think it would be a mistake for all of us to list all of these as informing mega-narratives (since no institution could programmatically do justice to all of them) it would be refreshing to see some of us take some (or at least one) of them seriously. An institution explicitly inspired by the freedom of the Christian or by the dimensions and implications of stewardship would, I think, be an inspiring and interesting place to be. What would be discouraging and dispiriting, on the other hand, would be to be part of an institution that lists all these things in its mission statement but uses the statement merely as a cover letter for business as usual.

Tom Christenson  
Capital University  
January, 1997